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ABSTRACT

This study explored the phenomenon of dropping out of high school from the perspective of those who strayed. The voices of four recent dropouts were audiotaped and examined through an interpretive ecological lens designed to explore dropping out within the context of the school community. Informants were asked to describe their school histories, highlighting special grades, events, or teachers; identify factors leading to their decision to withdraw; and discuss present circumstances and future plans. The researcher reviewed cumulative student achievement records to ascertain the official account of each informant's school history. Informants agreed that the traditional school setting itself had become an obstacle and that a change of environment initiated by dropping out positively impacted their emotional wellbeing. Respondents resented being expected to do what everyone else did and wondered if they could have created their own schedule with flexible attendance arrangements for the times when they felt particularly incapacitated. All respondents agreed that a diploma was an important status symbol, but they did not necessarily consider it a prerequisite for a good job or a connected life. Informants' comments highlighted the ways in which school communities were not welcoming of cultural diversity. (Contains 31 references.) (SM)

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Running Head: STORIES FROM THE STRAYS: WHAT DROPOUTS CAN TEACH US

Stories From the Strays: What Dropouts Can Teach Us About School

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Abstract

A review of current literature highlights the need for school shepherds to consider the strays when determining how best to tend the flock. In response, this study explores the phenomenon of dropping out of high school from the perspective of those who strayed. The voices of students who recently dropped out are transcribed and examined through an interpretive ecological lens designed to explore of this act within the specific context of the school community. The findings and implications of this analysis provide compelling incentives for educators to initiate critical dialogue around issues of existing school structures, policies, and practices.

Stories from the Strays: What Dropouts Can Teach Us About School

Many school corporations conscientiously collect data from recent graduates about their school experiences. Yet rarely are non-graduates contacted for information about their academic histories. Though *official* reasons for dropping out are dutifully assigned to each student by administrators or their designees according to the codes provided by the State Department of Education, local school officials often understand little about why the students *really* left school.

The purpose of this study was to explore student perceptions about dropping out. It seeks to interpret the meaning and ramifications of the act of withdrawal from the perspective of those who have withdrawn prior to graduation. The study examines the decision to leave school as an act that occurs within a specific context or social setting, that of the community of school. What might dropouts themselves tell us about school that could help us better understand their decision to withdraw despite widespread sentiments of disapproval? From *their* perspectives, what impact has the decision to withdraw had on their social and economic status. How do they envision their futures?

Why Do Their Words Matter?

There are significant reasons for attending to what dropouts have to say about their school experiences and to their suggestions for school improvement (Kronick & Hargis, 1998; Farmer & Payne, 1992). Their unique perspectives provide researchers with a glimpse into how they viewed school and what they valued (Fine, 1991; Cusick, 1973). Asking for the opinions of dropouts acknowledges the probability of shared responsibility for the complex phenomenon of dropping out, and suggests that school officials can benefit from their insights (Dorn, 1996). Such conversations concede the established right of the individual (at 16 and with parent permission) to make informed decisions about remaining in school.

Research that examines the beliefs of former students about the personal and ecological factors that impact school attendance is enlightening. All school communities harbor significant untapped resources, such as dropouts, whose voices have been systematically silenced (Fine, 1991). The messages they can share about their school experiences need to be solicited, valued, and utilized in determining school mission statements, planning learning programs, assessing school climate, and assigning and evaluating school personnel. Such listening promotes critical dialogue about social and economic injustices that deny access to educational opportunities and determine eventual educational outcomes for marginalized students (Brantlinger, 1993).

The Traditional Dropout Profile

Traditional efforts to combat early school withdrawal include attempting to construct a composite dropout profile aimed at identifying candidates for early interventions. Giroux (2000), Brantlinger (1991), and Freire (1985) have demonstrated the determining role of such factors as socioeconomic status in contributing to alienation and lack of perseverance in students who eventually drop out. Dropouts as a group have been characterized by an overrepresentation of minorities, males, and non-native English speakers (Brantlinger, 1993; Fine, 1991; Freire, 1985; Ogbu, 1981). Dropouts often are retained in earlier grades and have histories of chronic absenteeism and/or truancy. (Dorn, 1996).

Fine's comprehensive 1991 study concluded that dropouts are often nonconformists, ones who are not afraid to challenge the system. Traits such as lonely, misfitting, and low achieving also have been associated with dropouts, although school records identify many dropouts as being of average-ability (Dorn, 1996; Kronick & Hargis, 1998; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991).

For many of these students, dropping out has become a family tradition. Yet, though students may be identified who resemble this "at-risk" profile, practitioners remain reluctant to implement

dropout interventions, citing valid concerns that such labeling would result in self-fulfilling prophecies (Kronick and Hargis, 1998).

Research Methodology

In this study, the researcher conducted extensive single-session interviews with four former students whose names appeared on the 1999-2000 Student Dropout Report for the Indiana Department of Education. This sample was selected because the informants had very recent high school experiences and generally represented community demographics. Though I had been their ninth grade dean, I could not anticipate what these informants might say in retrospect when asked to describe their school histories.

Informants were asked to describe their school histories, highlighting special grades, events, or teachers; to identify factors leading up to the decision to withdraw from school; and to talk about present circumstances and future plans. These interviews were taped and transcribed, with written permission of guardians, because two informants were still minors. Whenever possible, the informants' exact words were used to substantiate conclusions. The researcher secured clearance from Indiana University's Human Subjects Committee for this study, as well as from a superintendent representing the participating school corporation.

The researcher also reviewed cumulative student achievement records to ascertain the "official" account of each informant's school history. Attendance, schools attended, grades, standardized test scores (including Graduation Qualifying Exam), promotions and retentions, assignment of special services, and high school transcripts (courses and credits) were all scrutinized as the recorded tracks of their school experiences. When volunteered, casual comments were noted from parents, family members, teacher advocates, and school staff.

Profiles of the Informants

Molly: Talented but Troubled

One informant, Molly, was a female of European-American descent. She grew up with her mother, who was employed, and two different stepfathers. Molly described generally positive experiences in elementary school despite experiencing significant emotional turmoil with her mother and one stepfather. Though she was an A/B student through the 7th grade, attendance and motivation were issues for Molly from the outset of high school. She fell behind in her classes, and despite parent conferences and other interventions, she continued to struggle. Her mother did not support referral to the local alternative high school.

Molly claims to have attempted suicide at least twice during her high school years, and was referred to a professional counselor. She was articulate and introspective and tended to be a leader in her peer group. Her Cognitive Skills Index (C.S.I.), a score derived from Indiana's statewide standardized test (I.S.T.E. P.) and used as predictive guide for learning potential, was consistently above average. Though her I.S.T.E.P. verbal subscore averaged around the 75th percentile, her math subscore dropped from the 91st percentilie to the 46th in four years. She eventually withdrew at age16 as a first semester sophomore with two credits.

Chris: An Athlete and a Father

Chris, was a male of European-American descent. His parents, both professional hairdressers, had been separated during his high school years but shared custody; he had an older sister. He was an outstanding athlete in elementary school, excelling at basketball. Chris was retained in the fifth grade, qualified for and received special education services through a learning resource center, and was placed on homebound instruction for the second semester of his 8th grade year. On standardized tests, Chris achieved average C.S.I. scores and had average math and verbal subscores, though his math

scores were generally higher. He passed the math subtest on the Graduation Qualifying Exam (G.Q.E.), and planned to retake the verbal portion on the next testing date.

Chris was a father at age 15, a situation complicated by the fact that the mother of the child was only 14 when the baby was born. He retains full custody of this child. He was serious, mature, and responsible, though admitted having peer conflicts and anger management issues at school. He missed an average of 20 days each school year. Chris withdrew as an 18-year old senior, eight credits shy of meeting graduation requirements, and having maintained a C grade point average.

John: Coping with Discrimination

John is a biracial male who identifies himself as Hispanic. His father was employed in construction and his mother was not employed outside of the home. All family members were bilingual; he had two older brothers and a younger sister. John moved to this town from Georgia, where his father had been a migrant worker. John and his brothers experienced significant racial discrimination there, and continued to be subjected to cultural prejudices in Indiana.

John was academically successful throughout elementary school and had mostly average grades in high school; his grade point average was C-/D+. He passed both sections of the G.Q.E.. He had average C.S.I. and verbal subscores and had a math subscore around the 70th percentile. John averaged 10 or more days of absences each year of high school. He was quiet, reserved, and respectful, and seemed to have few friends at school. He withdrew as a 17-year old senior lacking only 2 credits to graduate. At withdrawal, he stated that he would finish his diploma in night school at the adult campus, but failed to enroll there the following semester.

Casey: Seeking Stability

Casey, the fourth informant, was a male of European-American descent. He lived in a two-parent home and had three older sisters; his father was a professional and his mother was a

homemaker. He had attended a parochial elementary school in town, where he was an above average student. His C.S.I. and math subscores were consistently above average, though his verbal subscore dropped from the 87th percentile to the 25th in five years.

Casey seemed to have many friends, but preferred hanging around older students, some of whom were suspected substance abusers. He began skipping classes, resulting in failing grades and necessitating parent conferences. He transferred to the alternative high school during his sophomore year, attending half-days. His grades and motivation seemed to improve there, where he earned B's his sophomore year. However, his grades fell to mostly D's in the 11th grade. He withdrew from that high school as a 17-year old junior when the alternative school staff determined that Casey should either attend the adult campus or return to the traditional high school for his senior year, a decision based primarily on his recent drop in achievement.

What School Records Tell Us

Data on cumulative records revealed that the informants did not conform to the stereotypical, at-risk dropout profile, nor were their histories uniform. Informants as a group did not experience a high degree of transience; two remained at their respective neighborhood elementary schools for their entire careers and two attended more than two elementary schools. Two informants were reported as having excessive absences from elementary school (more than 10 days per semester). All had average or above average achievement through early and later elementary; only one of the four was retained and later qualified for special services. All had mostly average grades in middle school, though one completed eighth grade on homebound placement. During grades 3-8, standardized scores in total math were higher than total verbal, a curious finding as students generally had higher school grades in language arts. Cognitive skills indices were above average consistently for two informants and average for the other two.

High school transcripts described significantly different individual profiles. Chris and John, despite absences, had average achievement and made steady progress toward graduating with their classes. Both elected traditional courses, though Chris continued to receive special support services throughout high school. Each missed significantly more days of school than classmates, and each had been suspended from school at least once.

Casey and Molly experienced academic difficulties and developed disciplinary problems in the ninth grade; one eventually transferred to the alternative high school for grades 10 and 11 and the other remained at the traditional campus. Each student each had at least one suspension.

The informants verbally corroborated the records from elementary school. Three vividly recalled enjoying school back then. Chris said, "I always liked elementary school, especially the principal and one other teacher...It was great then, and we won everything, like the city basketball tournament;" Molly said, "I think that was the time I was the happiest, like everybody was still okay, and I always had a large amount of friends;" and Casey said, "I was doing really good then, making A's and B's on my report cards, 'cause the discipline was strict there, and it was mostly one-on-one, and it wasn't so big…it was a good home."

John recalled having an emotionally difficult time separating from home in elementary school, and school attendance records confirm that he had excessive absences. A third grade teacher left a note in his permanent file stating that he was permitted to take medicine at school for chronic stomachaches; another teacher remarked on his 5th grade report card that "John didn't seem to want to come to school" and "he lacks any energy for learning." Nevertheless, he had *no* grades lower than a B+ until 6th grade.

How Dropouts Perceive School Withdrawal

Bronfenbrenner's ecological development model stresses the need to assess decisions as events occurring in response to perceived environmental pressures within a sociocultural context (1979). Barker's (1964) theory also highlights the necessity of studying any behavior within its specific setting. And symbolic interactionism describes the ways in which people construct their social reality based on their perceptions, which themselves are derived through their beliefs and past experiences (Cusick, 1973). Such theories maintain that people's perceptions of the situation inform their decisions and determine their eventual courses of action.

It is enlightening to study the informants' comments about the act of withdrawal through this interpretive, ecological lens. The decision to withdraw most certainly restricted the quality of their relationships within the school culture, but it did not necessarily have an adverse affect on their status in other settings, such as home or work. Though they may have been described by themselves and by others as failing in one arena, they seemed to be functioning well in others.

For this reason, the informants in this study maintained that they were withdrawing *from* something, but going *to* something else. Though possibly misguided, they perceived themselves as having acted constructively. In their thinking, they were leaving a dysfunctional, confused, unfamiliar setting and entering one over which they believed they had more control. For Molly, this meant physically moving away from a troubled relationship with a parent that overshadowed school performance. For Chris and John, this meant completing high school credits in a more accommodating setting. Casey indicated that the traditional high school was the *only* setting in which such personal difficulty was occurring. This conclusion corroborates Fine's findings (1991), which revealed that students believe the *act* of dropping out reflects their need to gain control of their own lives. As Molly said, "I was going to do what I wanted and nobody was going to stop me."

Weighing the Tradeoffs

They stated that the decision was *not* spontaneous, that they had given it much thought, and that friends and family members did not encourage the choice; all claimed they had considered the tradeoffs but their immediate negative feelings about school were more compelling than the distant, long-range goal of graduation. In this way, they believed that they approached the decision to withdraw pragmatically, indicating that they had reached the point at which there seemed to be no other reasonable choice. John's comment is representative of the group's conclusion about school: "Dropping out made sense, except for losing my license. This way I could start working more hours in the day. I have a really good job; its much better than school, for now." Molly added, "Things had just been sliding too far downhill. I was wasting my time. It wasn't that big a deal." And Chris said, "It was a relief. I don't think I could've stood another day. I just got fed up with it; it was the easy way out."

None of the informants minimized the impact of their decisions to withdraw. Each likened it to having closed one door but opened another, and in their thinking, it was not possible to change their minds now and re-enter the school door. As Chris said, "When I think of how close I was, I kind of wonder what it would have been like to go ahead and finish. But once you leave, it's over. You can never go back." And they all had good reason for believing what Chris articulated; at the time of withdrawal, each was required to sign a document stating that they understood they were voluntarily relinquishing the privileges of being a student, and henceforth would be prosecuted as trespassers if caught on school grounds.

Alienation Within the School Setting

None of the informants described high school as a hospitable setting; none felt welcome at school or believed that they would be missed. John believed that he had been subtly encouraged to

leave, whereas Casey, Chris, and Molly claimed they were pushed out. Molly stated, "The teachers had little schemes planned to get me in trouble so I'd get kicked out," and John said, "No one tried to get me to stay, no one cared if I left or not. They were too busy with other stuff." Chris expressed feelings of resentment in this passage:

> I just kind of feel like it was unfair; they made up stuff that I didn't do to get me to leave... stuff that's just not my style... (my dean), he never liked me, I think they were afraid of me. They said they would kick me out. It made me feel like a convict.

And Casey said,

> I never really liked my classes; I came to school because I had to. It was a drag. Students don't want to be in school, so when we get in trouble we get kicked out. I think that is one of the most stupidest punishments, because that's the one thing we really like. And then [the alternative school], it was more to benefit you...but they told me I couldn't come back.

Pipher (1996), Bronfenbrenner (1979), and Lightfoot (1978) have described the tensions created by entering a large, impersonal school. Students experience a sort of culture shock upon entering high school and have difficulty adjusting to the new environment and its strange rituals, choosing instead to withdraw into the familiar confines of home (Crawford, 2000;Giroux, 2000). When probed, dropouts have confided that they considered themselves as educational "drop-ins" who developed few positive relationships with adults or peers while at school (Fu, 2000; Fine, 1991; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Informants reported that their unique needs were not addressed by teachers or school officials, and that no one cared about them. Similar to what other researchers have found, they did not feel valued and established few relationships of trust with teachers or other adults at school (Glasser, 1969;

Sizer, 1992; Brantlinger, 1993). John, supporting recent statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics (2000), described himself as a loner who had no allies at school; he credited a powerful bond with his three older brothers as being "really the only reason I survived…I learned a lot of lessons from them." Chris also admitting having few attachments to school, as did Casey, who said,

> I had no one to cover my back. There were more acquaintances than friends…
> but I just cared about being cool, hanging out with them…and then sometimes
> they just wanted someone to get high with.

These students tended not to become engaged in school sports or club activities, a finding similar to those in Fine's study (1991). Molly claimed that she was not interested in going "where all the higher class kids were," and John suggested that such activities were for the "preps." Only Chris stated that he had enjoyed participating in school sports, but had become disillusioned by trying to please the coaches and by some of the behaviors of his "kind of immature" teammates.

The Teachers Who Made a Difference

Yet when pressed to think about a positive experience, three informants could name favorite teachers from earlier grades. For example, Molly said,

> I had this one teacher, I liked her because she was cool about stuff…I think it was because
> of the fact that she was black, and that made a difference because she had a different way
> of looking at things than other teachers…and took stuff in an entirely different way. She
> told you exactly how things were…but I thought it was cool that she wasn't afraid of me
> and would tell me off if I needed to settle down.

And Casey said, "Some of the teachers could have done a lot better. But if every teacher in the school was like Mr. Smith, this world would be a better place…that's one teacher I really liked." Chris could also recall one special teacher who always helped him in the learning resource area; he said, "Mrs. B.

is probably the only teacher who would believe in me." Consider another comment from Molly:

> In sixth grade I had this one teacher who tried so hard, he was a good person, he was always really nice. Because that was when I started having problems, and I wasn't into school like I should have been. Like if I didn't do my homework, he'd sit down with me and try, you know, he'd go over there and help me with it. He never lost his cool, he kept with me…And then he actually allowed me to teach other students… It really helped, and my grades went up and because of him I was able to make it through that year.

Cultural Barriers

Crawford and Cummins (cited in Ovando, 2000) have discussed the loss of security that results when students of one culture are removed from their families and made to participate in the culture of another. Varenne and McDermott (1998) remind us that moving into an unfamiliar community from one that is known can lead to disorientation and cultural conflict. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner (1979) maintained that when the "role demands in different settings were compatible," trust and goal-orientation naturally evolved that led to the healthy adjustment of the developing person. Not surprisingly, then, students who are perceived to be well-adjusted by teachers often have had less difficulty adapting to the school environment because such surroundings more closely resemble the culture and values of their homes (Harrison, et al, 1990; Fine, 1991; Fu, 1999).

The informants in this study expressed loss of identity and motivation with the transition to and continuation at a culturally (if not ethnically) diverse high school. Chris admitted, "It was just a battle, you had all these people everywhere… but I didn't fit." They were overwhelmed by the perceived foreign and unfriendly rituals of school and longed to stay home in a sanctuary of familiarity. Molly

said, "It was a lot of little stuff, well, I guess major stuff too, that just weren't adding up, like with 'honesty is the best policy', well, that's a load of crap." And John added,

> I got into lots of fights before high school because I didn't fit in…I felt really out of place…then in high school, it was not so much discrimination up front, but you just knew that underneath people didn't like you…it was very stressful, but I just decided to suffer through it. I tried to pay attention to my teachers and not cause problems or anything…I was really respectful, because that's how I was trained at home, to just ignore people who don't have any reason not to like you, and that it's not important to be popular…but by the end I got so I was speaking my mind more freely.

Yet that does not mean that home life was idyllic for these students. Comments from informants included: "I watched over my sister when my mom drank;" or "That year, in the 7th grade, it was so hard…I mean, there were people coming and going all the time and you didn't know where to sleep;" or "My parents were clueless. I could be high 24/7 and they didn't notice;" and, "My parents fought all the time, I was used to it." Molly said,

> Me and my mom had always been really close and then she met Joe…she was more worried about money than love…So I just ate by myself after that…He was very violent, he broke a dog's neck out of anger one time… I remember I asked Mom if I could move out, and she told me it was all right as long as I could find someone to sign the papers. But I sill wanted to be close to my mother and I couldn't do that if I moved out. See, it was the fact that you either listen to Joe and you still have a place to live, or you go with her family and try to do it on your own. She picked the wrong one though.

Nevertheless, the informants generally characterized their family and life at home as very important and three listed family members as having played the most pivotal role in their educational histories. John said, "I remember not wanting to go to school because I was so worried about what was going on at home... I thought about it a lot and decided that it was just better to be home." Chris said, "I know I always had too many absences, but it was easier to stay home. It was like I just didn't see the point of being there every day." After dropping out, all of the students continued to seek and maintain family support and three of the four were living with parents or a grandparent.

Parents vs. School Officials

Lightfoot (1978) and Belenky (1986) have discussed the dilemma that evolves when parents feel forced into an adversarial relationships with school officials; they resent being required to suspend their judgment and send a miserably unhappy student to school every day. Two sets of parents, those of Casey and Chris, confirmed those findings; they wanted their students to do well but believed that the attendance policies were unreasonable and punitive. Like the parents in Brantlinger's study (1993, p. 11), "[The parents] wanted their children to be successful, but they were not surprised when they failed." Traditional school rhetoric, conversely, describes such parents as enabling and non-supportive of education; as Fine suggested in her 1993 study, educators often maintain that the family is in fact *the* source of the dropout's problems in school.

Academics Are Not a Priority

Despite widespread concern among practitioners that schoolwork and standardized testing procedures may be too demanding for some students, none of the informants expressed the belief that their courses were too difficult or that they were unable to do the assignments, and none seemed to believe that the inability to pass a standardized test would have prevented them from graduating. Casey commented, "The schoolwork was the easy part. I aced a lot of my stuff. It made me slack off." And

Molly said, "Nothing really scared me; I just didn't think about the grades at all and didn't care to put the effort in." John added, "I just didn't feel like doing my homework in high school...I didn't care, as long as I was passing. And I was pretty sure I could do the G.Q.E. the first time without even studying."

Although such comments certainly may reflect a psychological need to justify failing, or giving in and giving up in a way that is less ego-bruising, it also highlights a significant reality: academics per se were *not* described as major stressors in the school lives of these dropouts.

The Need for Emotional Time-Outs

State and district compulsory attendance policies and course requirements for graduation are rarely flexible (Kronick & Hargis, 1998; Dorn, 1996; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991). For students who do not qualify for special needs services or meet federal guidelines for exemptions (e.g., through a Section 504 hearing), little can be offered beyond school counseling to accommodate students experiencing episodic or chronic, though not life threatening, symptoms of emotional or physical pain. For such reasons, the organization and structure of school have been criticized as primary forces in shaping dropouts (Cusick, 1973; Dorn, 1996; Farmer & Payne, 1992; Fine, 1991). Ironically, such policies were created to keep students in school but have instead become obstacles to earning a diploma (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991).

Three informants felt overwhelmed by such a restrictive environment. They stated that there were times that they were so debilitated by personal problems that they chose not to go to their classes, and that *daily attendance had become the primary obstacle to remaining in school.* Molly said, "I was an emotional wreck...I just couldn't take it." They described feeling emotionally drained; having already depleted their emotional reserve tanks, they were unable to deal with additional school hassles. As Casey said, "I was messed up then; I really needed to get myself together for awhile..." And Chris

added, "I would get so frustrated and then I just lost my temper and went off on somebody." They lacked the coping strategies or resiliency to effectively manage their problems by themselves and symptoms tended not to improve even for the two referred for out-of-school counseling.

The Cycle of Self-defeating Behaviors

Several informants said that they became increasingly depressed, and were engaging in what other researchers have described as the cycle of self-defeating behaviors (Fine, 1993; LeCompte, 1991). The grades of John, Molly, and Casey dropped, the attendance for all four became sporadic, and discipline referrals occurred for Molly and Casey as they became associated with substance abuse. Casey commented, "Drugs are very bad. They will make you fall downhill really quick. And it doesn't really even click until you do it and then you mess up and realize what you've done wrong."

Molly, a suspected victim of emotional abuse as a child, became suicidal; she said I was "obsessed with hurting myself". Chris, exhausted from juggling school, work, and a child, was chronically absent from school. He said, "I just went to school with a bad attitude...I was always holding back my anger from things that had started before."

Researchers have shown that students under physical or emotional duress become discouraged and experience learned hopelessness (Brantlinger, 1993; Kronick & Hargis, 1998). Similarly, the informants in this described an inability to get up in the morning, as well as poor appetite, chronic headaches, or stomachaches. Three informants could recall begging parents to stay home and two would skip school if parents did not concede. They became anxious that teachers would demand their withdrawal from classes but couldn't face the stress of not being prepared or the probing questions about the nature of their absences. As Molly said,

> That's why I would never tell the school what was really going on at home... I didn't want to discuss it...because if you'd known you would've made

> Things worse...it was more trouble than it was worth. So I just lied...You guys all think that going to the (Youth) Shelter helps, but I'd rather hit the streets when I can't take it anymore at home...or go stay with friends for awhile. But I didn't want your kind of help, I just needed a break from school.

Schools as Communities of Practice

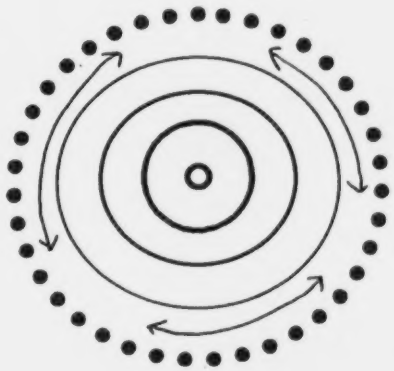
Situated learning theory holds that a school resembles a community of practice, or an inclusive unit of belonging that seeks to gradually draw newcomers from a peripheral role near the boundaries of the circle into a more centralized role within the community as a full participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Such a centripetal trajectory is guided through co-participation in organized engagements or apprenticeships in which the skills and knowledge necessary for assuming a pivotal role in the community evolve through practice; however involvement necessitates that the peripheral learner voluntarily adapt to this role by choosing to engage in collaborative activities.

But proponents of educational reform argue that the community of school is *not* designed to encourage such interaction, and in fact serves to maintain certain students in a peripheral orbit (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Often, the trajectory of a dropout never approaches the center of the community of practice called school (see Diagram 1).

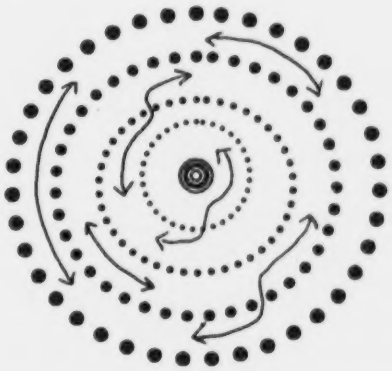
Internal pressures encouraging these informants to remain non-participants in school included such factors as a lack of self-efficacy, limited cultural adaptability, identity confusion, and emotional instability. However the absence of motivation to participate was precipitated and compounded by external social forces such as perceived discrimination, lack of individual attention, and the devaluation of students in academic distress. A cycle of alienation, both self-determined and

systematically imposed, prevented their assuming the centripetal trajectories of engaged students. Instead, they remained disengaged, in peripheral orbits around the boundaries of school.

Diagram 1: Personal Trajectory Within Community of Practice Called School



Peripheral Orbit of Participation
Characterized by Dropouts
from School



Centripetal Orbit of Participation
Characterized by Students Engaged
in School

Informants' comments implied that they did not believe that their input would be valued by others or serve a practical purpose in their own lives. In fact, they characterized themselves as having experienced little growth since entering high school. Casey commented, "I was wasting my time and I couldn't figure out why they thought everything was so important. Other kids may get into that stuff, but not the ones I hang with." And John said: "It was okay for the others, you know, the college kids, because they need it. But I thought it was boring to read a lot of those books, and I usually didn't. I only did what I had to to pass."

The other informants confirmed this criticism, describing themselves as physically and emotionally disconnected from classmates and faculty, and as not being attracted to the variety of activities offered at school. They portrayed themselves as being on the outside looking in, with no adults who were able to draw them more deeply into the circle or to motivate them to move inside on

their own initiative. As Chris said, "It didn't really matter. They ignored me so I ignored them." Such comments corroborate Brantlinger's 1993 finding: though students are made to visit the school community every day, many feel no compulsion to participate in it.

Creating Opportunities Within the Community of School

One compelling model for school restructuring is based on the situated learning theory. It suggests redefining legitimate school participation to provide greater access to choices and to opportunities for all students (as well as teachers and parents) to become included, instead of excluded (Lave & Wenger,1991; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Community participation illuminates our common beliefs, habits, and values, and mutual understanding and common purposes evolve. Previously disengaged students may develop trust and a willingness to consider new perspectives and alternative identities (Fu, 1999).

The informants in this study implied that they would have benefited from such restructuring and from teacher-mentoring, as well as from other promising school reform models that propose multi-level, team-oriented, collaborative interventions (Cusick, 1973; Dorn, 1996; Fine, 1991; Kronick et. al.,1998; Farmer & Payne, 1992; and LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991). Such recommendations could be implemented through modified schedules, individual and group counseling, multicultural education, extended placement in alternative programs, and home-based instruction.

It is relevant that John mentioned that the one class he had looked forward to was school-based driver education, which was designed around the apprenticeship model and was truly a life skill that appealed to all high school students. Ironically, it was eliminated from the curriculum after our district streamlined its budget and cut costs by removing all frills. In the transformed community of school, rationale for making curricular decisions and establishing graduation criteria would be grounded in

developmental and sociocultural learning theory, and application methods would be driven by documented community values and needs.

Students who withdraw have commented that they could not find real-life relevance in their studies and perceived little connection between mandatory coursework and eventual career paths (Dorn, 1996; Cusick, 1973). While schools traditionally have been depicted as self-contained entities, historical evidence documents the impact of technological, economic, and sociocultural trends on educational practices (Kliebard, 1995). Educators have witnessed the rise and fall of many curricular innovations such as apprenticeships, internships, term-projects, vocational placement, and life-skills, and the result has been ambivalence in financial and curricular commitment to programs designed to forge links between school and the world outside of school.

Limited Identity Possibilities

Within all communities of practice, identity is always under construction (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Representations of past experiences and conversations with others are used to create dynamic social images that are internalized as self, ones that are constantly reflected and reshaped through interaction with others (Belenky, 1986; Brantlinger, 1993). Students who are not engaged in the mainstream of the school community lack opportunities to define themselves in new and different ways, and are hampered in their imagining of "possible selves". They lack access to the adults and peers who serve as models and who prompt the constant comparisons and attention to social mirrors that allows people to adjust old identities or accommodate new ones (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

For example, Chris stated that he/she "finally just gave up in sports because the coach didn't like me"; his school identity as an athlete was deconstructed and he lacked the resources with which to construct a new one. Similarly, Molly and Casey were unable to find acceptance in the traditional niches for identity growth, moving by default among various pockets of students with alternative

values. And since motivation and behavior are regulated by self-concepts, if concept construction is limited, so will be the perceived choices and resulting action (Markus, 1986).

The informants could not justify exploring new roles within the school setting when they were unable to see a clear connection between that effort and rewards outside of school. Through past experience they had learned to expect little, put forth minimum effort, and accept whatever was offered (Brantlinger, 1993; Ogbu, 1981). As Brantlinger pointed out in her 1993 study (p.11), "Though they valued the stamp of approval of the diploma, they were not convinced that school knowledge was relevant to other aspects of their present and future lives."

The Value of a Diploma

Yet, though unwilling to remain in school, they expressed longing for a diploma, a tendency supported by current research (Fine, 1991; Kronick, 1998). Consider the comments below:

Student Quotes
Chris: It's important. I want to get mine someday…but I can still go on to Ivy Tech or I.U.P.U.C. with a G.E.D.
John: It's valuable, that's why I went back and finished my last credits. My father always said, 'as long as you are in this house you will be in school until you graduate.' My brothers told me that they would kick my butt if I didn't bring one home someday, so I guess I sort of grew up knowing that I would get one.
Molly: Oh, I'd love to have a diploma. It's a real accomplishment and my Mom really wants me to get it. I always thought I'd graduate someday.
Casey: I'd give anything to have a diploma…I would even go back to [the alternative high school] if they would let me.

Challenges Ahead

When questioned specifically about the repercussions of the decision to leave school, informants appeared realistic and sober about the challenges that lay ahead, but expressed cautious

optimism about the future. Molly and Casey did admit to a downside of dropping out, that a sense of loneliness had resulted from being set apart from their peers. As Ogbu (1981) pointed out, they were now social misfits without a peer group, trying to survive in an adult community not designed to include them. Casey said, "That's the only part of school I miss, the interaction. Interacting with other people was really one of the best things about school." But Molly and Chris stated that they were purposely staying away from old acquaintances because "(the friends) were messed up" or "all of them are pregnant." Each expressed his or her vision of the future as follows:

Molly: I know what I need to do, but for right now I'm just going to save money for a car. I'm just working until I'm 18, then I'm going to get my G.E.D. I'd go to classes now but I can't get over there. The G.E.D. is my best bet now that I'm almost 18.
Chris: I miss having friends and fun, but I don't miss school. I already took the G.E.D. once and passed the verbal part. Now I just have to go back and take the math, and then I want to go to Ivy Tech to become an auto mechanic.
John: I already went back and took my last courses for a diploma. Now I'm saving for college. I want to go into culinary arts. I knew that I had to go to college if I wanted to be something… work can only take you so far.
Casey: I know I messed up before, and that was my fault. But I won't mess up this time. I can't just let my life go down the drain. I look forward to making my life better. I'll take the G.E.D. as soon as I turn 18, and then maybe go on to Ivy Tech and just take general classes.

Lives Moving Forward, Lives on Hold

Chris, now 19, is living in an apartment in another county with his five year-old son and a new girlfriend. He works in construction, earning more than minimum wage, and has his own car. Chris and his parents are contemplating meeting with the special education director at the high school to explore the feasibility of completing graduation requirements as a homebound student. But even if he does

decide to work toward a diploma, Chris still plans to retake the G.E.D. verbal sub-section in July as the G.E.D. will allow him to go on to Ivy Tech and pursue his goal of becoming a certified auto mechanic. He is back to playing basketball on a church league team, which has been very therapeutic: "I'm almost as good as new with sports again; they keep me motivated." He seemed independent, calm, and content. He said, "I feel better now because I'm on my own...I don't have to answer to anybody." He is rebuilding his self-esteem and will persevere.

John may have been a statistical dropout, but he now is a high school graduate. Though he did not re-enroll immediately, he completed diploma requirements within 12 months of withdrawing and now plans to leave town to go to college. He said, "I can't wait to get out of [this town]; there's nothing for me here." He enjoyed his culinary courses at the adult campus and hopes to become a professional chef. He is currently living at home and saving money from his job at a local restaurant. The Hispanic community is growing in our town, and John, who is almost 19, tutors Spanish-speaking 18 to 21 year olds. Understandably, his family is proud of his accomplishments and is helping him buy a car so he can move in with a brother. He is motivated to explore new life challenges and is on his way to achieving his dreams.

Casey is waiting. He is hoping to be re-admitted to the alternative high school, and if that petition is not granted, he will wait until he turns 18 in August and attempt the G.E.D. Though his current grades do not reflect it, he is quite bright and will probably pass both sections on the first attempt. He rarely sees peers, saying, "My social life has really gone downhill…I can't hardly have any friends." Casey had no job or career plans at the moment. He said,

> I really don't know what I'm going to do right now. I always imagined I'd sit down in front of a computer, getting paid good money, like my Dad. I wanted to go to college, I knew that I had to go to college if I wanted to be something. But if I can

> get a G.E.D., that will give me something to get me going. Then I'll just do general classes while I'm figuring out what to do.

While he is waiting, he lives at home, where his parents and older sisters continue to worry about him.

And *Molly* lives in another county with her grandmother. She works at a fast-food restaurant; her grandmother provides the transportation. She has been in and out of therapy, but says,

> I'm really not much for counseling because I don't want to tell beyond a certain extent and then the rest of it does not need to be known. I keep everything else to myself, and I just won't talk about it. They tell me that if I was to get it off my chest it would help me let go of it, but then again, I can just bottle it all in and just go on. I still go to counseling, but I won't take the pills. I'm not taking medication to get rid of my problems...that's a cover-up.

She sees her Mom and sister once in a while and occasionally sends them money from her paycheck. She admits to being lonely, though says, "I like to be alone because then I'm always in control." Yet she was the only informant who said, "I miss school;" then after thinking for a moment she smiled and said, "Well, I miss learning about new things. I used to really like school. But I don't miss going *to* school." Though only 17, she has drawn some conclusions that demonstrate her remarkable insight:

> It finally hit me that I'm the only one who can fix my life. So I'm really trying because when I left [this town], I made a promise to myself that I was going to straighten up. I told myself no more trouble, no more of those things you were doing that were not healthy and I was going to change and I decided that my attitude was going to change too. I was going to be honest about everything. And it's been the best thing I ever did because now I have more respect from more people.

Constructing Meaning From Their Experiences

The informants in this study agreed that the traditional school setting itself had become an obstacle, and that a change of environment initiated by dropping out positively impacted their emotional well beings. Casey, who attended the alternative school, believed that the change in school environment had been pivotal to his episodes of academic effort. Similarly, John was so desperate to leave the traditional high school setting that he chose to complete graduation requirements in night school at a nearby adult campus. Individualized educational plans could have been implemented for each of the informants that might have initiated opportunities for them to continue to learn and work toward a diploma in a multitude of settings, including at home via web-based courses.

The informants professed that they resented being expected to do what everyone else did, and wondered if perhaps they could have created their own schedule with flexible attendance arrangements for the times when they felt particularly incapacitated. Chris wanted to come early and leave at lunch on a modified schedule; Casey and Molly preferred arriving later in the morning and remaining through the afternoon on a reduced schedule. Such comments highlight the essential role of compassionate staff who recognize Maslow's hierarchy of human needs; for all of us, survival, safety, belonging, and self-esteem are prerequisites for intellectual achievement (Woolfolk, 1990).

Is the diploma a valued credential? Though all informants were in agreement that it is an important status symbol, they did not necessarily believe it to be a prerequisite for a good job or for a contented life. As American comprehensive high schools continue to impose new standards and add challenging requirements to graduation criteria, such as graduation qualifying exams and senior projects, it may be timely to reconsider the motives for doing so and attend to those for whom such expectations seem like insurmountable obstacles.

Exit Interviews as Brainstorming Sessions

These students are entitled to legitimate exit interviews that may be conducted following a case conference format. In addition to the student (who must be at least 16), his/her parent, and the principal or his/her designee, such meetings also could include a counselor, teacher advocates, a case worker or probation officers, and the school psychologist. This goal of the team would be to ensure that the decision-making process is thoughtful and informed and to explore all options for *continued enrollment* prior to agreeing to sign the Request for Student Withdrawal. If the team approves the withdrawal, the student could be strongly encouraged to consider re-enrolling the following semester. School officials could follow up by contacting the student later in the semester to track his/her progress and check on plans to return to school.

It is rarely in the best interest of a 16 year old to withdraw from school, and every attempt should be made to accommodate that student within the extended school community. Molly made a life-altering choice when only 16 years old, an age at which making such a complex decision may not be developmentally appropriate. Both Molly and Casey remain in a kind of limbo, hovering between two worlds, waiting for something important to happen, but ready to move on with their lives if only directions to that destination were clearer to them. Whereas John and Chris envision a much wider range of choices and possibilities for themselves now that they have exited school, the opportunities for Casey and Molly appear quite limited.

Embracing Cultural Diversity

The informants also alert educators to the ways in which school communities may not be welcoming of cultural diversity. Administrators can find ways to involve parents and families in daily school activities, programs, policy decisions, and site-based management teams (Maddaus, 1991; Harrison, et al., 1990)). Teachers and staff can be challenged to re-evaluate their stereotypes and

prejudices about certain groups of students, and time-on-task computation and needs assessments can be data-driven tools to document the need for additional staff and/or instructional materials. Giroux (2000) and Belenky (1986) remind educators that by assuming responsibility for understanding other cultures, they acquire sensitivity to alternative identities, values, and goals, and may become the bridge that connects a school with the students who often feel like strangers there.

For many educators, an understanding of the "dropout problem" is framed by a cultural or learning "deficit" paradigm and shaped by traditional assumptions about social conformity that place students who do not succeed academically into marginalized positions in the educational system. As Dorn states (1996), "Educators and social critics have created, rather than discovered, the dropout problem." Including such valuable resources as withdrawn students and their family members in our school restructuring discourse offers a means of shifting toward more equitable ways of thinking about students, such as the talent development or cultural-ecological models (Ovando, 2000; Ogbu, 1981).

Limitations of This Study

This project was not designed to determine causes for the complex phenomenon of dropping out or to assign blame to an individual or system for its reality. There is no assumption that all dropouts resemble the ones interviewed here; these portraits are of real people, not composites or stereotypes, and they represent only their own experiences. And clearly, district expectations and state policies for school attendance vary greatly from school to school, as do graduation requirements.

Furthermore, in all research based on self-reported data, there is the risk of drawing conclusions based on human perceptions and selective memories. It is possible that informants may shade their accounts to please us or portray themselves in idealistic ways. Nevertheless, such research provides the sort of thick description of phenomenon that can only be secured through conscientious capturing of dialogue.

Implications: Tending the Flock

Complex questions remain, challenging educators to explore more fully the ways in which students negotiate their way, some seemingly able to cope with the complexities of the school environment by adapting or demonstrating resiliency, while others find the obstacles insurmountable and quietly disappear or succumb to the temptations of mind-numbing substances and school avoidance in order to survive. Parents, students, and educators must encourage opportunities to engage in democratic discourse about the school experience. We must try to co-create a "public space" where all voices can be heard, in order to understand what really is best for each individual student and to collaborate in envisioning a more inclusive school community (Fu, 2000).

Clearly, school shepherds must make daily decisions that reflect their goals and priorities; with an entire flock to manage it is often difficult to find time to follow the few who stray. Yet educators would be wise to occasionally forgo gentle cajoling and resort to outright nipping at the heels of the students who are separating from the flock. It is essential that these students understand that their individuality need not cost them the right to protection as a member of the group. And though the school gate must certainly be guarded to exclude predators, we must resolve to keep it open at all times, not only to permit the informed departure of those who are determined to survive on their own or to seek a different fold, but also to serve as a constant reminder to those seeking to rejoin the flock that they are always welcome.

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